DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 193 686 CS 205 956

AUTHOR Fagan, Edward R.
TITLE Writing and the Prospective English Teacher.
PUB DATE Oct 80
NOTE 9p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of English (Allentown, PA, October 24-25, 1980). For related documents see CS 205 954-957.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills: Communication Skills: Educational Assessment: *Educational Research: Education Majors: English Teacher Education: Higher Education: *Preservice Teacher Education: *Secondary School Teachers: Teaching Skills: *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Evaluation

ABSTRACT

As part of a study of the basic skills of secondary level education students, a study was conducted at Pennsylvania State University of the writing ability of prospective secondary level teachers. Raters holistically scored writing samples of 43 preservice teachers of English, mathematics, science and social studies. When writing scores of all four groups were examined in a correlational matrix, science and English teachers were in the top group with the science teachers outscoring the English teachers slightly and mathematics teachers were next with social studies teachers scoring the lowest. Writers who scored in the top half of the holistic scale displayed focus, organization, and coherence in their papers: the poor writers tended to be disorganized and prone to technical and mechanical errors. The findings revealed that of the 43 subjects, four needed some counseling and remediation and eight needed an intensive review of writing fundamentals. (MKM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Edward R. Fagan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED193686

Writing and the Prospective English Teacher

Edward R. Fagan

Background

Of the several articles addressed to the reform of teacher education in the October 1980 issue of the Phi Delta Kappan, Watts (1980) lists a vapid generalization about prospective teachers' English competence: "A majority of teacher preparatory programs require that the applicants demonstrate proficiency in English. "Amen," to that; the author, however, points out that proficiency is defined as "a grade of C in English composition," and he feels that "the lowly C" doesn't beget confidence in prospective teachers' language capability. Nor does prospective teachers' successful performance on an English proficiency examination--an option some programs provide for those unable to obtain the C grade in composition.

While the author is attempting to save the profession from all prospective teachers with "lowly C grades" in composition, prospective secondary English teachers (at least, tacitly) should never (well, hardly ever) have a C grade in that course. Do you suppose that the author ever explored the reliability or validity of composition grades as predictors of academic success in college programs, or even their accuracy in predicting students' grades in other English courses? Probably not, for as every composition teacher knows, variations among composition grades are notorious (Diedrich, 1974) not only from teacher to teacher but also by any given teacher, that is, grades given to a set of compositions on Monday could be quite different from grades given to the same set of compositions on Friday. A prospective teacher's competency based solely upon a C grade in composition is highly

CS205956

suspect. It is suspect because composition grades have questionable reliability and validity but, more important, it is suspect because it is a judgment based upon a single trait used to condemn the entire network of competencies which comprise any teaching model.

While all of us recognize the excluded middle in Watts' logic, it's important to note that the general public doesn't. They simplistically believe that B grades on prospective teachers' compositions will insure qualified teachers of "the basics." They also believe (from other media blasts at teacher education, Time, June 16, 1980; Washington Post, August 31, 1980) that a low score on standardized test--Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) American College Test (ACT) National Teacher Examination (NTE)--equals poor academic performance. We mistakenly assume that the public will sift media hyperbole for facts; unfortunately, there's a growing tendency on the part of the public to be uncritical of media reports about public education, and we are forced to justify every jot and tittle of our professional existance.

No teacher objects to accountablility; all of us are aware of weaknesses in teaching programs at all levels and are willing to correct them. We recognize, too, that there are no perfect teacher education programs, that they can be constantly improved. Still, we have yet to convince the general public that we are at work to correct their complaints about our designs for learning, and what follows is just one plan (among many) for the improvement of prospective secondary English teachers' writing skills.

Underlying Assumptions and the Problem

In drafting a program for the improvement of prospective teachers' writing skills, we assumed that:

(1) the students had some writing skills as determined by their admission to the University (which uses selection admission criteria), by their successful completion of the required basic English courses, and by their successful completion of freshman/sophomore field experiences program (which required written reports)

(2) the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) composition measuring device currently extant (Kirrie, 1980) could provide a functional screening tool for the identification of prospective teachers with writing problems

(3) the holistic grading technique for composition evaluation could be taught to a group of graduate assistants such that a 70 percent or better interrater reliability could be attained

(4) the systematic counseling and remediation procedures used for the general University population would allow prospective teachers to achieve writing competence or to be counseled into some other vocational field

With the foregoing assumptions in mind, our study attempted to answer the following questions:

a. how well do preservice, secondary English teachers write when judged by CEEB holistic grading standards?

b. how does the writing of preservice English teachers compare to the writing of secondary teachers in general?

c. how effective are remedial programs for prospective, secondary English teachers in bringing them to prescribed competency levels?

d. how effective are counseling services in providing successful alternatives to teaching as a career?

At present, the third and fourth questions cannot be answered, but the University's recent and modest funding of reading/writing laboratory for remedial students is a first step in that direction.

Procedures

Forty-three students (Ss) enrolled in the first term of a three-term-methods-course sequence were given twenty minutes to respond to either "a" or "b" of the following questions:

(1) What does the information contained in this* article suggest about the influence of research results on instruction? In your opinion, is this an accurate representation of the application of research findings in instructional practices in general? Suggest ways that research could have a greater influence on instruction.

(2) The author notes that the data reveals a "consistency agreement among teachers" regarding ability grouping. Suggest some possible reasons for this widespread agreement.

Notice that these questions follow the same general format as those used by the CEEB in its test (p. 5) and serve as the foundation for the holistic scoring of compositions. Holistic scoring is defined as "reading for the total impression they [essays] make on the reader," (p. 4). Although two readers should be used to meet CEEB criteria for holistic scoring, only one reader for each essay was used in this study.

Specifically, a random sample (N=12) of student papers from Ss 43 essays was used to train raters for CEEB's holistic scoring. Nine graders were given the CEEB materials on holistic scoring and were allowed to ask questions about the procedures. After questions were answered, each rater was given a

---

*Barry S. Wilson and Donald W. Schmits, "What's New in Ability Grouping?" Phi Delta Kappan, April 1978.

package of unscored essays, coded simply A, B, C, . . . L. Authors of same were not identified, and all raters were asked to read and score, holistically, essay C. Scoring was to be based on the CEEB 4-1 scale, where 4 is the highest and 1 the lowest score. After all raters had scored essay C, each rater's score was listed on a tally sheet so that interrater discrepancies could be noted.

Essay C had been given a prior score of 4 by the rater's instructor. Five of the 9 raters scored it the same as the instructor. Discussion of the reasons for the score variations (one "1", one "2", and two "3's") led to observations that organization, language, and sequencing affected the choice of scoring number both positively and negatively.

Following that discussion, raters were asked to score essay A. Again, the tally, discussion, and continuation of holistic scoring continued until 80 percent agreement among the raters' scores was achieved. If agreement had not been reached, another random sample would have been drawn and the procedure repeated.

Findings

To check the reliability of ratings, Winer's (1962) formula for same yielded a .71 coefficient for interrater correlations of prospective teachers' writing (N=43). Without the two-reader protocol recommended by CEEB personnel, the .71 agreement was arbitrarily accepted as satisfactory.

Correlations were made among writing scores obtained by prospective secondary English teachers and prospective teachers of mathematics, sciences and social studies within the holistic scoring system. Among those groups, prospective science teachers scored highest but English teachers were within a few hundredths of the science teachers or, negatively there were no

significant difference in writing scores between science and English teachers; there were significant differences between science and English teachers and teachers of mathematics and social studies with the social studies teachers scoring lowest as a group within the holistic grading schemata.

As might be inferred from the previous data, there were high correlations between prospective teachers' reading and writing scores when the Verbal section of the Nelson Denny tests were compared to the holistic scores. Correlations were also high between writing and speaking scores and, as one might also infer, the science and English groups had the highest scores in all areas followed by the mathematics and social studies groups.

Discussion

High correlations between prospective teachers' reading and writing scores might have been expected, but high correlations between writing and speaking scores were unexpected since a common criticism of CEEB graders about those who scored in the lower half of the holistic writing scales was "While such ideological vagueness and linguistic looseness frequently characterize casual speech. . . they are detrimental in expository writing," (p.9). These CEEB raters' judgments about speech and writing, however, were based on samples of high school writing, whereas the screening procedures used in this study of prospective teachers should produce more able writers and speakers.

Holistic scoring, by definition, is supposed to ignore technical errors and other inept distractors for theme readers. Yet, for essays scored on the lower half of the holistic scale, that is "1" and "2," technical errors

did sidetrack holistic scorers. Generally, these errors were el'iptical; that is, generalizations without supporting evidence, allusions to concepts without definitions, short sentences without demonstrated relatedness. Mechanical writing errors tended to be relatively similar to those made by the general population," that is, subject verb and/or subject pronoun agreement, extensive use of cliches, inappropriate word choice. With the poorest group, the "1's," four or more spelling errors per page plus their inability or unwillingness to use contractions interfered with holistic scoring.

Again, as one might infer, these errors tended to be found in groups. Preservice teachers with numerous spelling errors, subject-verb agreement problems, elliptical sentences tended to have unfocused, stream-of-consciousness-like writing displays. It is important to note, however, that of the 43 Ss, only four would fit the "1" category of holistic grading. Another eight would have few mechanical errors but enough technical errors to rate them a "2" in holistic scoring. Obviously, counseling and remediation will be recommended for prospective teachers scoring in categories 1 and 2.

Speculating about science teachers' high writing scores, we think that the analytical nature of the writing assignments struck some resonance with their laboratory report writing where their habitual attention to ordering and sequencing details was congruent with our assigned topics.

Summary and Conclusions

Responding to public concerns about prospective secondary teachers' abilities to write well enough to be considered competent, this study arbitrarily defined writing competence as a score at the "3" or "4" level as those levels were described within CEEB's holistically-scored English Composition Test (Kirrie, 1979). Using the Test's protocols as a base,

nine raters were trained in an adaptation of CEEB's holistic scoring until an interrater correlation of .71 was obtained. These raters holistically scored 43 writing samples of preservice teachers of English, mathematics, science and social studies. When writing scores of all four groups were examined in a correlational matrix, science and English teachers were in the top group with the science teachers outscoring the English teachers by a matter of a few hundreths; mathematics teachers were next with social studies teachers scoring the lowest. Writers who scored in the top half of the holistic scale displayed focus, organization, and coherence in their papers; the poor writers tended to be disorganized and prone to technical and mechanical errors. Of the 43 Ss, four will need some counseling and remediation. Another eight will need some intensive review of writing fundamentals.

In conclusion, readers should recall that holistic scoring is only a rough measure of writing skills and should be supplemented with additional writing evaluation instruments. Readers should also recall that sample size in this study is small, that the scoring procedures are an adaptation of the CEEB protocols, and that we are in the process of refining all these screening procedures so that we may, ideally, improve the quality of prospective secondary teachers within the Commonwealth's high schools.

References

Diedrich, Paul. Measuring growth in writing. Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1974.

Kirrie, Marjorie et al. The English composition test with essay: Princeton, NJ: College Entrance Examination Board, Educational Testing Service, 1979.

Watts, Doyle. Admissions standards for teacher preparatory programs: time for a change. Phi Delta Kappan, 1980, 62, 120-122.

Winer, B. J. Statistical principles in experimental design. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962.